

Romans: The Hope of Righteousness (part 2 of 9)

God Loves Us in Our Weakness

Romans 5:6-11

Mark Vroegop

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Romans 5:6-11 (ESV)

“Jesus loves Me, this I know

For the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong

They are weak but He is strong

Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes Jesus Loves me

Yes, Jesus loves me, for the Bible tells me so.”

For many of us, “Jesus Loves Me” was the very first Christian song that we learned as a child. It’s simplicity, affection, and comfort is what makes the song memorable and meaningful. Did you know, however, that the song text was written in the 1850s, and it was originally a poem in a novel by Anna Warner? In 1861 William Bradbury wrote the tune that accompanies the text, and it was known as “China” in some hymnals because of its popularity among missionaries in the Far East.

The song is not complex, but its basic truth regarding the personal love of Jesus and our weakness is comforting and precious. While there are better songs with deeper meaning, I think it is wonderful if a child learns the basic truths that are celebrated in it. There is much more to Christianity than the content of “Jesus Loves Me,” but God’s love for human beings through Jesus and recorded in the Bible is a rich and deep truth. Karl Barth (1886-1968), the Swiss Reformed theologian who many regard as the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, was once asked what his greatest theological discovery was. He replied: “Jesus love me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

Last week we resumed our study of the great book called Romans, and we learned from Romans 5:1-5 how *peace with God gives us hope in hardship*. We learned how justification by faith creates peace with God such that we have a new standing with God, love the glory of God, and can see all suffering through the lens of God's sovereign and kind plan for our lives.

The pericope ended with a statement about hope and God's love: "and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." Rom. 5:5 Paul indicates that there is something foundational and assuring about God's love. So he expands upon this theme of the love of God in order to ground what he has said about peace with God and hardship. "Jesus loves me, this I know . . ."

From Romans 5:6-11, I want to look at three realities regarding the love of God and see how they relate to our lives.

A Love That Rescues Sinners (vv. 6-8)

The essence of the beauty of the love of God is the way that God has treated those who did not deserve His love. Once again Paul contrasts God and human beings, and we see the way that God comes to the rescue of helpless sinners.

Paul begins his explanation of God's love by describing the condition of human beings as "weak" and "ungodly." These are overlapping terms designed to show us how bad human beings really are. The point in these verses is to show God's love to people who are in need of spiritual rescue, and a central part of this text's power is the fact that God loves people before they stop their rebellion. God rescues sinners. He rescues sinners in their sin.

The word "weak" is a word that can refer to physical weakness (1 Cor. 2:3) or sickness (Luke 10:9). But in this context it is used figuratively to describe a lack of moral strength, inner poverty or (best) spiritual incapacity.¹ Thus, the NASB translates it as "helpless" and the NIV as "powerless." The point is simply that human beings are spiritually incapable of being in a right relationship with God on their own. We are dead in our trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). We are physically alive but spiritually dead. We have a will and affections and desires, but they are naturally and continually set on the wrong things.

In order to really understand and appreciate the love of God, you have to see that God's love was set upon us through the death of Christ before there was an inkling of love or desire for God. He loved us first. God loved us before we turned toward Him, before we acknowledged His rule in our lives, and before we repented of our sins. The gospel is a "search and rescue" mission, not an achievement recognition. God sought you before you ever sought Him.

The other term that Paul used here is the word "ungodly." Human beings were loved while they were still weak, and Christ died for the ungodly. What does this mean? The word "ungodly" is used

¹ Kittel, Gerhard, Gerhard Friedrich, and Geoffrey William Bromiley. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 1985 : 84. Print.

throughout the New Testament and in Greek literature. In Greek philosophy this Greek term was used by Plato to describe unworthy spiritual ideas, and Epictetus used it for the refusal to honor divine gifts. Philo, the Jewish philosopher, connected this word to the denial of God's existence. From a philosophical perspective, the word "ungodly" can mean belief that is not fitting with order of the universe or the divine order.

The New Testament uses the word to describe life that is oriented away from God, a life that shows contempt for God in belief and action. Ungodliness is more than just the sins that human beings commit. Ungodliness is a state of mind, and that is why the Bible often makes a distinction between ungodliness and unrighteousness or sinful actions. Let me show you two examples:

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." (Rom. 1:18)

"understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers . . ." (1 Tim. 1:9)

To be ungodly and weak means that the orientation of the human heart is set against God. We do not desire the rule and reign of God. Human beings actively resist submitting to who God is. We naturally dislike His glory and love our own. And it means that we are powerless to do anything about it. Paul's description here should make us tremble. Our ungodliness, sinfulness, and our incapacity combine to create a dire picture of our spiritual state.

However, look at verses 6-8 to see the beauty of what is here. This text is about God's mercy in pursuing sinners in their sin. It is about God's love pursuing you before you even thought about pursuing Him. Notice how often the word "while" is used: 1) "while we were still weak" (v 6), 2) "while we were still sinners" (v. 8), and 3) "while we were enemies" (v. 10). God's love comes to sinners in their distress. This is the essence of God's grace – love that comes to the undeserved and the resistant.

What's more, this love came at "the right time," which means that God had it perfectly timed in accordance with His sovereign plan, and the circumstances surrounding the moment that you heard and understood the gospel (maybe even today) was not an accident. God is so relentless in His love for sinners that there is nothing that is accidental or left to chance.

Just think about the significance of these two phrases in the Bible: "Christ died for the ungodly" (v. 6) and "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (v. 8). Jesus became our representative and our substitute (see 2 Cor. 5:14-15, Gal. 3:13). He died for the sins of those who had not yet surrendered. He made atonement for those who were not yet repentant. Jesus died for those who were His enemies. This is very, very unusual.

Verse 7 highlights this. The meaning of this verse is simply that it would make sense to die for someone who deserved it because of their morality (righteous) or to die for someone who was kind to you (a good person). But to die for the ungodly and while they are still sinning is scandalous. To die

for people who not only do not appreciate what you are doing, but who are resistant to your sacrifice seems like a waste.

This is the trauma and transformation that comes from God loving sinners. It changes everything. It means that if you are here today, you can come to Jesus today. He loved you and died for you as you are. You don't clean up to come to Jesus; you give up and come to Jesus. Once you have tasted this sweet and undeserved grace, it changes how you see yourself. It humbles you and creates a heart of worship in your soul. It makes it unthinkable and despicable to glory in yourself when God rescued you as a sinner from your sin. And it also makes you run back to God's grace when you still show your imperfections, fail, or do not measure up. It gives you assurance and comfort because it was God who saved you, and it is God who will keep you to the end.

But it also makes you treat other people differently. Knowing that God loves sinners should make Christians love sinners too. It means that we are moved to reach out to people before they have cleaned everything up. It means that the gospel-centered people are tilted toward action, not inaction. Through our money, our time, and what we do, our lives are biased toward rescuing sinners.

Grace orients you not just to stop being dismissive or from just being receptive. Grace propels you to act.

A Love that Brings Reconciliation (vv. 9-10)

The second aspect of God's love that is featured in this text is the way in which love creates a new relationship between God and us. Paul uses verses 9-10 to emphasize what he has previously said in verses 6-8, but he sets the beauty of God's grace in a more personal context through the word reconciliation. This is a more personal section, as the argument moves from statements about a believer's standing (e.g., "justified by faith" – 5:1, "Christ died for us" – 5:8) to a much more intimate idea. God rescued sinners to bring them to Himself.

In verse 9, you can hear the turn begin: "since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood . . ." Paul is setting things up so that we can see the implications of justification. Previously, Paul has talked about justification through redemption (Rom. 3:24), through faith (5:1), and now through His blood (5:9). To say that we are justified through His blood is to connect the sacrifice of Christ to the Old Testament sacrificial model where sinners are brought near to God's holy presence by the death of another. Reconciliation was only possible because of death.

We also find the first use in Romans of the word "saved" in verse 9, and this word serves as the bridge between the problem of our sinfulness and the beauty of reconciliation. People who are justified by faith are saved from something and saved to something.

We are saved from God's wrath. Now we touched on this last week as we talked about peace with God being the result of the appeasement of God's wrath. But let me just reemphasize to you that we are not just saved from our sins; we are saved from the wrath of God against our sins. One commentator stated this truth so well: "The ultimate threat confronting sinners is neither sin itself, not

the power of Satan, not even death, but the wrath of God.”² There is nothing more dangerous than sovereign and omnipotent and holy justice poured out on deserving rebels. I wonder if our experience of the New Heaven and the New Earth will include the joyful trembling of really seeing the glory of God, really understanding the ugliness of our sinfulness, and realizing how dangerous sin is when you are standing before a holy God who knows everything about you. I wonder if in our gratitude we might find ourselves saying, “Wow, that could have been really scary.”

Paul is highlighting that the death of Jesus did more than just cleanse us from our sins. The death of Jesus removed the obstacle for God’s love, and it opened wide the path of reconciliation. Jesus removed what we were powerless to address so that God could make us what we would never become without Him.

The love of God reaches a crescendo in verse 10 with the connection between being God’s enemies and then being reconciled through the death of Jesus. Previously, Paul had used words like “weak” or “ungodly,” but now we see the full picture. Sinful human beings would be under the wrath of God because in their sin, they are God’s enemies. Romans 8:7 reiterates this same idea:

“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.” (Rom. 8:7)

God set His love on us and demonstrated that love through the death of His son even while we were still His enemies. God saved and reconciled His enemies to Himself.

What does the term reconciliation mean? To be reconciled means to be restored in your relationship. It means that we are now friends with God, that He has established a new relationship with those who have put their faith in His Son. And the tone of the text would indicate that this is something that is a present reality through Jesus. We are reconciled now. Enmity has given way to embrace.³

The effect of this is sweeping. It means that God is more like a father than a judge (Rom. 8:15), that we are fellow heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17), that we are indwelt with His presence by the Spirit (Rom. 8:15), that we are invited to pray to Him with confidence (Heb. 5:16), and that He does really hear us (1 John 5:14). The love of God, through justification and reconciliation, has changed our past sins and our present experience.

He loves us. He knows us. He has forgiven us. He welcomes us. And it is all because of what He did. God befriended His enemies.

But there is also something here that relates to the future, and it central to the argument of the text. Verse 10 is basically saying that if God has done all of this (i.e., justification, saved from wrath, the death of His son, and the reconciliation of His enemies), then surely we will be saved in the end by the life of Jesus. We find assurance of our salvation here, and it is a warm-up of what is to come in Romans 8:28-39. Paul is looking toward the future and telling believers that they can have confidence in their

² Colin Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans – The Pillar New Testament Commentary Series*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 230.

³ Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 309 – quoting Graham Cole.

future deliverance because of the extent of God's love. Our hope for the future does not rest on our ability to "stay the course" but on God's ability to love us. Eternal security or the assurance of salvation does not come from my ability; it rests on God's ability.

Suffering can cause you to question if what you believe is real or if you will keep believing. I think it is a pretty normal question to have when you are hurting deeply, and this kind of text is enormously comforting because it points us back to the reality of what God has done for us. In other words, it anchors our hope in God's love in the reality of our reconciliation. It grounds our confidence, not in our subjective feelings, but in what God accomplished for us through Christ. So when you doubt God's love, you need to read Romans 5. When you fear for your future, you need to rehearse what the beauty of God sending his Son for His enemies. If you wonder, "How can any good come out of this?" You need to look to the cross and see how much good came out of that horribly gracious day. You need to hear the words of Paul in Romans 8:32.

"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32)

We need to learn to live on the love expressed to us in reconciliation, and then we need to apply that love and grace in the world. On a personal level, reconciliation means that Christ died for me in my worst possible condition, so when I fail or fall, He will not give up on His plan to restore me. I belong to Jesus. It also means that I can trust that Jesus will keep me, guard me, and preserve me all the way to end of my life.

The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 has a great first question and answer that relates to what we are talking about today:

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

God loved us, and He will continue to love us because He has reconciled us, but this is not just about us. People who have been reconciled love to see reconciliation, and they also know how it works. Whether it is two people or a family or families, gospel-loving people know how they have been treated by God, so they are (or should be) motivated to treat others with the same kind of grace. One of our Core Values is Extravagant Grace, which means that we aim to treat people with the same kind of grace that God has treated us. Tonight we are praying together with the believers at Traders Point Church because we believe that God is as much at work in their church as He is in ours and because we believe that the needs of our city should be our concern. One of the reasons why I am hoping and praying for our church to become even more racially diverse is because there is something beautiful

about racial reconciliation and love for people who are not like you but who have been rescued by Jesus. How wonderful would it be if we were known not as Black, White, Hispanic, Asian, Indian, or whatever background, but as a reconciled people.

God demonstrated his love by reconciling His enemies. Thank God He did.

A Love that Creates Exultation (v. 11)

The final aspect of God's love that we see in this text is found in verse 11, and it begins with the phrase "more than that." We saw this phrase last week in verse 3, where it introduced the idea of rejoicing in our suffering after talking about rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.

Romans 5:11 is the conclusion to what Paul has said since verse 1. After talking about wonderful truths related to justification, peace with God, endurance in suffering, God's love, and now reconciliation, Paul reminds us what all of this is about. If we understand what Paul is talking about here, we will be left marveling in the beauty of God.

Notice that the text ends with a reference to reconciliation. We will talk about rejoicing in a moment, but for now just notice that reconciliation leads to rejoicing. The work of God leads to the worship of God. Salvation is not mainly about the salvation of sinners; rather, it is about the adoration of God. The redemption and reconciliation of sinners is the platform upon which God is magnified.

Additionally, this rejoicing in God is accomplished through the work of Jesus. It is through Him that reconciliation is possible, and it is through the work of Jesus that the path to the glorification of God is laid. Jesus is the means by which we are saved and God is praised.

Verse 11 says "we also rejoice in God." Let's unpack that phrase. The word is translated as "rejoice" in the ESV, but NIV renders it as "boast" and NASB as "exult." All of them fit the meaning of the word, but I like the word exult here for two reasons. First, the word means to rejoice triumphantly or exceedingly. Paul is talking about more than being happy here. He is talking about emotions that are related to glorying in or delighting in something. Second, I like exult here and rejoice in verse 3 even though they are the same Greek words. Here is why: because it feels like verse 11 is the expression of joy in God Himself. So to say "rejoice in our sufferings" and "rejoice in God through Jesus" just does not seem to capture the tenor of the text.

It seems to me that Paul is showing us how justification, peace with God, reconciliation and God loving helpless sinners restores what was marred and broken in chapters 1-2. The tragedy of Romans 1-2 was the way that human beings rejected not just God's laws or His existence, but even more it was the rejection of God as God. So what does God do? He pursues helpless, powerless, and rebellious people by killing His own son for their sins so that they could exult in God. He loves sinners so that sinners can love Him. He justifies sinners so that sinners can be happy in Him.

But to exult in God means more than just being happy. It certainly includes that. It means:

Jesus loves me, this I know

For the Bible tells me so . . .

To exult in God means that you are banking everything, including your eternal destiny, on the fact that "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." In your conversion, in your suffering, in your doubts, in your failures, in seasons of blessing, and in sacrificial service of others, you are convinced that "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." To be convinced of the love of God means that you can even approach the last days of your life with a deep conviction that Jesus still loves you.

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Thanks be to God that we are weak, but He is strong.

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